

“Saluting the Papal Toe”: Veneration, Renovation and the Sincerest Form of Flattery

Original composition *versus* adaptation is a dilemma which, when pursued through history, tends to recede as endlessly as the opposition between city and country. Already for John Dryden in 1679, the historical escalator was taking two thousand years to stop: “The poet Aeschylus was held in the same veneration by the Athenians of after ages as Shakespeare is by us; and ... the value of his writings after his decease was such that his countrymen ordained an equal reward to those poets who could alter his plays to be acted on the theatre, with those whose productions were wholly new, and of their own.”

Eighty years after Dryden ventured to ‘alter’ Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, the battle lines were so firmly drawn that there were few who thought the relative merits of adaptation and original composition equal. On the one hand there were the likes of Edward Young, whose 1759 *Conjectures on Original Composition* deplored the servility of “Imitators and Translators”; for Young, such writers end up “treading the sacred footsteps of great examples, with the blind veneration of a bigot saluting the papal toe.” On the opposing side were the champions of imitation like Oliver Goldsmith, who in the same year—1759—started a magazine entitled *The Bee*. Sooner be a busy bee, gathering honey from the best sources you can find, than condemn yourself to inhabit a dirty and flimsy spider’s web of your own spinning.

Among the writers incited by Goldsmith to a very literal saluting of the papal toe was George Crabbe, whose *Inebriety* (1775) reveals a young man inebriated by the exuberance not of his own verbosity but of Alexander Pope’s. The opening lines set the pattern by treading—or moving Crabbe-wise—in the sacred footsteps of the four-book *Dunciad*. What *Inebriety* does to *The Dunciad*, however, *The Dunciad* had done to *Paradise Lost*. The moment when Milton’s “gorgeous East,” at the start of Book II of the latter work, turns at the opening of his own second book into Pope’s “gorgeous seat” is a good point at which to pause the escalator because Pope’s rearrangement is a miniature model of what adaptation is. It begins in an act of controlled textual manipulation, with Pope acknowledging a ‘great example’ even as he anagrammatically redistributes it; and that act is performed in a spirit both of veneration and, by the same token, of renovation.